

ELLERY QUEEN'S

Mystery Magazine®

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PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER: *Joel Davis*EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 77, No. 2, Whole No. 449, January 28, 1981. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at \$1.35 a copy. Annual subscription \$17.50 in U.S.A. and possessions; \$19.50 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, CT 06836. Controlled circulation postage paid at Dallas, PA. © 1980 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. *ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE*® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

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a NEW short story by

JACK RITCHIE

Emily was visiting friends in San Francisco. Yes, she might be gone for a long time. Yes, it was true she had taken very little with her in the way of luggage. Yes, something funny was going on—which will come as no surprise to Jack Ritchie fans . . .

THE ABSENCE OF EMILY

by JACK RITCHIE

The phone rang and I picked up the receiver. "Yes?"
"Hello, darling, this is Emily."

I hesitated. "Emily who?"

She laughed lightly. "Oh, come now, darling. Emily, your wife." "I'm sorry, you must have a wrong number." I hung up, fumbling a bit as I cradled the phone.

Millicent, Emily's cousin, had been watching me. "You look white as a sheet."

I glanced covertly at a mirror.

"I don't mean in actual *color*, Albert. I mean figuratively. In attitude. You seem frightened. Shocked."

"Nonsense."

"Who phoned?"

"It was a wrong number."

Millicent sipped her coffee. "By the way, Albert, I thought I saw Emily in town yesterday, but, of course, that was impossible."

"Of course it was impossible. Emily is in San Francisco."

"Yes, but *where* in San Francisco?"

"She didn't say. Just visiting friends."

"I've known Emily all her life. She has very few secrets from me. She doesn't *know* anybody in San Francisco. When will she be back?"

© 1980 by Jack Ritchie.

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"She might be gone a rather long time."

"How long?"

"She didn't know."

Millicent smiled. "You have been married before, haven't you, Albert?"

"Yes."

"As a matter of fact, you were a widower when you met Emily?"

"I didn't try to keep that fact a secret."

"Your first wife met her death in a boating accident five years ago? She fell overboard and drowned?"

"I'm afraid so. She couldn't swim a stroke."

"Wasn't she wearing a life preserver?"

"No. She claimed they hindered her movements."

"It appears that you were the only witness to the accident."

"I believe so. At least no one else ever came forward."

"Did she leave you any money, Albert?"

"That's none of your business, Millicent."

Cynthia's estate had consisted of a fifty-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy, of which I was the sole beneficiary, some forty-thousand dollars in sundry stocks and bonds, and one small sailboat.

I stirred my coffee. "Millicent, I thought I'd give you first crack at the house."

"First crack?"

"Yes. We've decided to sell this place. It's really too big for just the two of us. We'll get something smaller. Perhaps even an apartment. I thought you might like to pick up a bargain. I'm certain we can come to satisfactory terms."

She blinked. "Emily would never sell this place. It's her home. I'd have to hear the words from her in person."

"There's no need for that. I have her power of attorney. She has no head for business, you know, but she trusts me implicitly. It's all quite legal and aboveboard."

"I'll think it over." She put down her cup. "Albert, what did you do for a living before you met Emily? Or Cynthia, for that matter?"

"I managed."

When Millicent was gone, I went for my walk on the back grounds of the estate. I went once again to the dell and sat down on the fallen log. How peaceful it was here. Quiet. A place to rest. I had been coming here often in the last few days.

Millicent and Emily. Cousins. They occupied almost identical large homes on spacious grounds next to each other. And, consid-

ering that fact, one might reasonably have supposed that they were equally wealthy. Such, however, was not the case, as I discovered after my marriage to Emily.

Millicent's holdings must certainly reach far into seven figures, since they require the full-time administrative services of Amos Eberly, her attorney and financial advisor.

Emily, on the other hand, owned very little more than the house and the grounds themselves and she had borrowed heavily to keep them going. She had been reduced to two servants, the Brewsters. Mrs. Brewster, a surly creature, did the cooking and desultory dusting, while her husband, formerly the butler, had been reduced to a man-of-all-work, who pottered inadequately about the grounds. The place really required the services of two gardeners.

Millicent and Emily. Cousins. Yet it was difficult to imagine two people more dissimilar in either appearance or nature.

Millicent is rather tall, spare, and determined. She fancies herself an intellect and she has the tendency to rule and dominate all those about her, and that had certainly included Emily. It is obvious to me that Millicent deeply resents the fact that I removed Emily from under her thumb.

Emily. Shorter than average. Perhaps twenty-five pounds overweight. An amiable disposition. No claim to blazing intelligence. Easily dominated, yes, though she had a surprising stubborn streak when she set her mind to something.

When I returned to the house, I found Amos Eberly waiting. He is a man in his fifties and partial to gray suits.

"Where is Emily?" he asked.

"In Oakland." He gave that thought.

"I meant San Francisco. Oakland is just across the bay, isn't it? I usually think of them as one, which, I suppose, is unfair to both."

He frowned. "San Francisco? But I saw her in town just this morning. She was looking quite well."

"Impossible."

"Impossible for her to be looking well?"

"Impossible for you to have seen her. She is still in San Francisco."

He sipped his drink. "I know Emily when I see her. She wore a lilac dress with a belt. And a sort of gauzy light-blue scarf."

"You were mistaken. Besides, women don't wear gauzy light-blue scarves these days."

"Emily did. Couldn't she have come back without letting you know?"

"No."

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"No."

Eberly studied me. "Are you ill or something, Albert? Your hands seem to be shaking."

"Touch of the flu," I said quickly. "Brings out the jitters in me. What brings you here anyway, Amos?"

"Nothing in particular, Albert. I just happened to be in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop in and see Emily."

"Damn it, I told you she isn't here."

"All right, Albert," he said soothingly. "Why should I doubt you? If you say she isn't here, she isn't here."

It has become my habit on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons to do the household food shopping, a task which I pre-empted from Mrs. Brewster when I began to suspect her arithmetic.

As usual, I parked in the supermarket lot and locked the car. When I looked up, I saw a small, slightly stout woman across the street walking toward the farther end of the block. She wore a lilac dress and a light-blue scarf. It was the fourth time I'd seen her in the last ten days.

I hurried across the street. I was still some seventy-five yards behind her when she turned the corner.

Resisting the temptation to shout at her to stop, I broke into a trot.

When I reached the corner, she was nowhere in sight. She could have disappeared into any one of a dozen shop fronts.

I stood there, trying to regain my breath, when a car pulled to the curb.

It was Millicent. "Is that you, Albert?"

I regarded her without enthusiasm. "Yes."

"What in the world are you doing? I saw you running and I've never seen you run before."

"I was *not* running. I was merely trotting to get my blood circulating. A bit of jogging is supposed to be healthy, you know."

I volunteered my adieu and strode back to the supermarket.

The next morning when I returned from my walk to the dell, I found Millicent in the drawing room, pouring herself coffee and otherwise making herself at home—a habit from the days when only Emily occupied the house.

"I've been upstairs looking over Emily's wardrobe," Millicent said. "I didn't see anything missing."

"Why should anything be missing? Has there been a thief in the house? I suppose you know every bit and parcel of her wardrobe?"

"Not every bit and parcel, but almost. Almost. And very little, if anything, seems to be missing. Don't tell me that Emily went off to San Francisco without any luggage."

"She had luggage. Though not very much."

"What was she wearing when she left?"

Millicent had asked that question before. This time I said, "I don't remember."

Millicent raised an eyebrow. "You don't remember?" She put down her cup. "Albert, I'm holding a seance at my place tonight. I thought perhaps you'd like to come."

"I will not go to any damn seance."

"Don't you want to communicate with any of your beloved dead?"

"I believe in letting the dead rest. Why bother them with every trifling matter back here."

"Wouldn't you want to speak to your first wife?"

"Why the devil would I want to communicate with Cynthia? I have absolutely nothing to say to her anyway."

"But perhaps she has something to say to you."

I wiped my forehead. "I'm not going to your stupid seance and that's final."

That evening, as I prepared for bed, I surveyed the contents of Emily's closet. How would I dispose of her clothes? Probably donate them to some worthy charity, I thought.

I was awakened at two A.M. by the sound of music.

I listened. Yes, it was plainly Emily's favorite sonata being played on the piano downstairs.

I stepped into my slippers and donned my dressing robe. In the hall, I snapped on the lights.

I was halfway down the stairs when the piano-playing ceased. I completed my descent and stopped at the music room doors. I put my ear to one of them. Nothing. I slowly opened the door and peered inside.

There was no one at the piano. However, two candles in holders flickered on its top. The room seemed chilly. Quite chilly.

I found the source of the draft behind some drapes and closed the French doors to the terrace. I snuffed out the candles and left the room.

I met Brewster at the head of the stairs.

"I thought I heard a piano being played, sir," he said. "Was that you?"

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I wiped the palms of my hands on my robe. "Of course."

"I didn't know you played the piano, sir."

"Brewster, there are a lot of things you don't know about me and never will."

I went back to my room, waited half an hour, and then dressed. In the bright moonlight outside, I made my way to the garden shed. I unbolted its door, switched on the lights, and surveyed the gardening equipment. My eyes went to the tools in the wall racks.

I pulled down a long-handled irrigating shovel and knocked a bit of dried mud from its tip. I slung the implement over my shoulder and began walking toward the dell.

I was nearly there when I stopped and sighed heavily. I shook my head and returned to the shed. I put the shovel back into its place on the rack, switched off the lights, and returned to bed.

The next morning, Millicent dropped in as I was having breakfast.

"How are you this morning, Albert?"

"I have felt better."

Millicent sat down at the table and waited for Mrs. Brewster to bring her a cup.

Mrs. Brewster also brought the morning mail. It included a number of advertising fliers, a few bills, and one small blue envelope addressed to me.

I examined it. The handwriting seemed familiar and so did the scent. The postmark was town.

I slit open the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of notepaper.

Dear Albert:

You have no idea how much I miss you. I shall return home soon, Albert. Soon.

Emily

I put the note back into the envelope and slipped both into my pocket.

"Well?" Millicent asked.

"Well, what?"

"I thought I recognized Emily's handwriting on the envelope. Did she say when she'd be back?"

"That is *not* Emily's handwriting. It is a note from my aunt in Chicago."

"I didn't know you had an aunt in Chicago."

"Millicent, rest assured. I *do* have an aunt in Chicago."

That night I was in bed, but awake, when the phone on my night table rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello, darling. This is Emily."

I let five seconds pass. "You are *not* Emily. You are an impostor."

"Now, Albert, why are you being so stubborn? Of course this is me. Emily."

"You couldn't be."

"Why couldn't I be?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Where are you calling from?"

She laughed. "I think you'd be surprised."

"You couldn't be Emily. I *know* where she is and she couldn't—*wouldn't*—make a phone call at this hour of the night just to say hello. It's well past midnight."

"You think you know where I am, Albert? No, I'm not there any more. It was so uncomfortable, so dreadfully uncomfortable. And so I left, Albert. I left."

I raised my voice. "Damn you, I can *prove* you're still there."

She laughed. "Prove? How can you prove anything like that, Albert? Good night." She hung up.

I got out of bed and dressed. I made my way downstairs and detoured into the study. I made myself a drink, consumed it slowly, and then made another.

When I consulted my watch for the last time it was nearly one A.M. I put on a light jacket against the chill of the night and made my way to the garden shed. I opened the doors, turned on the lights, and pulled the long-handled shovel from the rack.

This time I went all the way to the dell. I paused beside a huge oak and stared at the moonlit clearing.

I counted as I began pacing. "One, two, three, four—" I stopped at sixteen, turned ninety degrees, and then paced off eighteen more steps.

I began digging.

I had been at it for nearly five minutes when suddenly I heard the piercing blast of a whistle and immediately I became the focus of perhaps a dozen flashlight beams and approaching voices.

I shielded my eyes against the glare and recognized Millicent. "What the devil is this?"

She showed cruel teeth. "You had to make sure she was really dead, didn't you, Albert? And the only way you could do that was to return to her grave."

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I drew myself up. "I am looking for Indian arrowheads. There's an ancient superstition that if one is found under the light of the moon it will bring luck for the finder for several weeks."

Millicent introduced the people gathered about me. "Ever since I began suspecting what really has happened to Emily you've been under twenty-four-hour surveillance by private detectives."

She indicated the others. "Miss Peters. She is quite a clever mimic and was the voice of Emily you heard over the phone. She also plays piano. And Mrs. McMillan. She reproduced Emily's handwriting and was the woman in the lilac dress and the blue scarf."

Millicent's entire household staff seemed to be present. I also recognized Amos Eberly and the Brewsters. I would fire them tomorrow.

The detectives had brought along their own shovels and spades, and two of them superseded me in my shallow depression. They began digging.

"See here," I said, exhibiting indignation. "You have no right to do that. This is *my* property. At the very least you need a search warrant."

Millicent found that amusing. "This is *not* your property, Albert. It is *mine*. You stepped over the dividing line six paces back."

I wiped my forehead. "I'm going back to the house."

"You are under arrest, Albert."

"Nonsense, Millicent. I do not see a *proper* uniformed policeman among these people. And in this state private detectives do not have the right to arrest anyone at all."

For a moment she seemed stymied, but then saw light. "You are under *citizen's* arrest, Albert. Any citizen has the power to make a citizen's arrest and I am a citizen."

Millicent twirled the whistle on its chain. "We knew we were getting to you, Albert. You almost dug her up last night, didn't you? But then you changed your mind. But that was just as well. Last night I couldn't have produced as many witnesses. Tonight we were ready and waiting."

The detectives dug for some fifteen minutes and then paused for a rest. One of them frowned. "You'd think the digging would be easier. This ground looks like it's never been dug up before."

They resumed their work and eventually reached a depth of six feet before they gave up. The spade man climbed out of the excavation. "Hell, nothing's been buried here. The only thing we found was an Indian arrowhead."

Millicent had been glaring at me for the last half hour.

I smiled. "Millicent, what makes you think that I *buried* Emily?"

With that I left them and returned to the house.

When had I first become aware of Millicent's magnificent maneuverings and the twenty-four-hour surveillance? Almost from the very beginning, I suspect. I'm rather quick on the uptake.

What had been Millicent's objective? I suppose she envisioned reducing me to such a state of fear that eventually I'd break down and confess to the murder of Emily.

Frankly, I would have regarded the success of such a scheme as farfetched, to say the least. However, once I was aware of what Millicent was attempting, I got into the spirit of the venture.

Millicent may have initiated the enterprise, the play, but it is I who led her to the dell.

There were times when I thought I overdid it just a bit—wiping at nonexistent perspiration, trotting after the elusive woman in the lilac dress, that sort of thing—but on the other hand I suppose these reactions were rather expected of me and I didn't want to disappoint any eager watchers.

Those brooding trips to the dell had been quite a good touch, I thought. And the previous night's halfway journey there, with the shovel over my shoulder, had been intended to assure a large audience at the finale twenty-four hours later.

I had counted eighteen witnesses, excluding Millicent.

I pondered. Defamation of character? Slander? Conspiracy? False arrest? Probably a good deal more.

I would threaten to sue for a large and unrealistic amount. That was the fashion nowadays, wasn't it? Twenty million? It didn't really matter, of course, because I doubted very much if the matter would ever reach court.

No, Millicent wouldn't be able to endure the publicity. She couldn't let the world know what a total fool she'd made of herself. She couldn't bear to be the laughingstock of her circle, her peers.

She would, of course, attempt to hush it up as best she could. A few dollars here and a few there to buy the silence of the witnesses. But could one seriously hope to buy the total silence of eighteen individual people? Probably not. However, when the whispers began to circulate, it would be a considerable help to Millicent if the principal player involved would join her in vehemently denying that any such ridiculous event had ever taken place at all.

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And I would do that for Millicent. For a consideration. A *large* consideration.

At the end of the week, my phone rang.

"This is Emily. I'm coming home now, dear."

"Wonderful."

"Did anyone miss me?"

"You have no idea."

"You haven't told anyone where I've been these last four weeks, have you, Albert? Especially not Millicent?"

"Especially not Millicent."

"What *did* you tell her?"

"I said you were visiting friends in San Francisco."

"Oh, dear. I don't *know* anybody in San Francisco. Do you suppose she got suspicious?"

"Well, maybe just a little bit."

"She thinks I have absolutely no will power, but I really have. But just the same, I didn't want her laughing at me if I didn't stick it out. Oh, I suppose going to a health farm is cheating, in a way. I mean you can't be tempted because they control all of the food. But I really stuck it out. I could have come home any time I wanted to."

"You have marvelous will power, Emily."

"I've lost *thirty* pounds, Albert! And it's going to *stay* off. I'll bet I'm every bit as slim now as Cynthia ever was."

I sighed. There was absolutely no reason for Emily to keep comparing herself to my first wife. The two of them are separate entities and each has her secure compartment in my affections.

Poor Cynthia. She had insisted on going off by herself in that small craft. I had been at the yacht-club window sipping a martini and watching the cold gray harbor.

Cynthia's boat seemed to have been the only one on the water on that inhospitable day and there had apparently been an unexpected gust of wind. I had seen the boat heel over sharply and Cynthia thrown overboard. I'd raised the alarm immediately, but by the time we got out there it had been too late.

Emily sighed too. "I suppose I'll have to get an entire new wardrobe. Do you think we can really afford one, Albert?"

We could now. And then some.